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ABSTRACT

Approximately 50 percent of all students who enter postsecondary education enroll in community colleges. Consequently, reviewing the characteristics of the community college curriculum is paramount to understanding the role these institutions play in shaping students' trajectories. To accomplish this task, it is imperative to track curricular changes as they occur in community colleges. This digest highlights major findings from the 1998 Curriculum Project, which was conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) and reported in the New Directions for Community Colleges volume entitled, "Trends in Community College Curriculum." Periodically, the CSCC surveys the curriculum of our nation's community colleges. For the 1998 study, 164 public community colleges submitted their spring catalogues and schedules. A previously developed coding scheme was applied to track 36 liberal arts and 26 non-liberal arts subjects. The findings from this study are presented in eight areas: liberal arts, non-liberal arts, general education requirements, interdisciplinary studies, honors programs, ESL courses, multicultural education, and distance education. Although ESL and distance education have increased, the traditional liberal arts curriculum is relatively stable. (Contains 10 references.) (VWC)

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Digest

February, 2000

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A Review of Community College Curriculum Trends

by Jenny Castruita Striplin

Approximately 50 percent of all students who enter postsecondary education enroll in community colleges. Consequently, reviewing the characteristics of the community college curriculum is paramount to understanding the role these institutions play in shaping students' trajectories. To accomplish this task, it is imperative to track curricular changes as they occur in community colleges. This Digest will highlight major findings from the 1998 Curriculum Project, which was conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) and reported in the *New Directions for Community Colleges* volume entitled *Trends in Community College Curriculum*.

Periodically, the CSCC surveys the curriculum of our nation's community colleges. The prior study was conducted in 1991. For the 1998 study, 164 public community colleges submitted their spring catalogues and schedules. Using student enrollments, the colleges were divided into categories of small (≤ 2,748), medium (2,749-6,140), and large (≥ 6141). A previously developed coding scheme was applied to track 36 liberal arts and 26 non-liberal arts subjects. The college catalogues and schedules of classes from the sample institutions were coded and tabulated along with enrollment figures.

An Overview of the Community College Curriculum

- Fifty-four percent of the course sections in the community college curriculum were in liberal arts.
- As defined by the institutions, 7 percent of for-credit course sections in the total sample were remedial. The percentages of English and Math courses at the remedial level were 29 percent and 32 percent, respectively.
- Overall, 74 percent of liberal arts courses and 34 percent of non-liberal arts courses were transferable to in-state four-year public institutions.
- Computer science showed the greatest increase in percentage of enrollment. In the 1991 study, 2 percent of students enrolled in computer science. In comparison, this percentage ascended to 4 percent in the 1998 study.
- This study supported the claim that community colleges offer small class sizes; in fact, many academic categories showed small decreases in average class size between 1991 and 1998.
- Although the number of students enrolled in 1998 was comparable to 1991 study, approximately 30,000 more course sections were offered.

The Liberal Arts

- The humanities, mathematics, science, social science, and fine and performing arts composed the liberal arts.
- In 1998, a higher percentage of colleges offered instruction in each of the 12 disciplines within the humanities.
- Over the years, the sciences have fluctuated in terms of percentages of colleges offering courses and the percentage of enrollment. Biology was the most popular science subject with 100 percent of the colleges offering at least one course in this field.
- The percentages of English and social science courses offered exhibit considerable stability.
- Between 1991 and 1998, one of the greatest shifts occurred in fine and performing arts, with the percentage of colleges offering these classes increasing dramatically.

Non-Liberal Arts Curriculum

- Results from both the 1991 and 1998 surveys indicated that the non-liberal arts curriculum accounted for less than 50 percent of the total community college curriculum.
- In colleges where a high proportion of liberal arts courses are accepted by universities, a similarly high proportion of non-liberal arts courses are accepted.
- In 1998, at least 90 percent of the community colleges offered classes in business and office skills, marketing and distribution, health sciences, computer applications, and education.

General Education Requirements

- A statement of the objectives of general education was included in more than half of the colleges' catalogues.
- Distribution requirements, the dominant forms of general education requirements, were part of the largest proportion of academic degree programs (69%) and a significant proportion of occupational degree programs (29%).
- Acquiring basic academic skills, especially composition and mathematics, was highly represented in statements of general education objectives for both academic and occupational degrees.
- Seventy-six percent of the schools required some computer literacy course in the transfer degree programs, while 86 percent required it for the nontransfer degree programs.

Interdisciplinary Studies

- Overall, interdisciplinary courses constituted one percent of the total community college curriculum and

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just under two percent of the liberal arts curriculum.

- More than half of the colleges offered some type of interdisciplinary course in the sciences, ranging from one to twenty sections.
- Fifty-six interdisciplinary courses were offered as distance education courses, using television, the Internet, and video as modes of delivery.
- From 1991 to 1998, the average number of interdisciplinary courses offered per institution increased from 4 to 5.

Honors Programs

- Of the 164 institutions studied, 36 percent offered honors programs to their students.
- Colleges with either larger enrollments or a higher proportion of transfer courses were more likely to offer honors courses.
- A negative relationship was found between the proportion of some minority groups and the availability of an honors program.

English as a Second Language

- A 15 percent increase in ESL course offerings was found, indicating that ESL programs still comprise a growing element of the community college curriculum.
- Institutional size played an important role in ESL course availability. Of the large community colleges with enrollment greater than 6,141, more than half offered more than 20 ESL courses.
- Geographic location of the institution also influenced the number of ESL courses offered: the Western, Midwestern, and Middle Atlantic states accounted for 71 percent of the ESL curriculum.
- At two colleges, each of which reported having a large ESL program, ESL courses made up more than 14 percent of all available courses.

Multicultural Education

- In 1998 the percentage of colleges offering ethnic studies rose to 26 percent following a decline from 1975 (15 percent) to 1991 (9 percent).
- The ways in which multicultural courses meet the general education requirements varied from institution to institution.
- Overall, the number of courses offered and the number of students enrolled in multicultural courses were relatively small.

Distance Education

- 128 colleges (78%) offered at least one distance education course. The number of courses ranged from 1 to 67, with an average of 20 distance education classes per institution.
- Only 2 percent of the 139,083 courses were offered through distance education.
- There was a direct relationship between the total number of distance education courses and college enrollment.
- The highest percentage of distance education classes was in the social sciences (i.e. economics, history, psychology, sociology, and political science) and the lowest percentage in biological sciences and foreign languages.

Conclusion

The findings from this study offered a look into the status of the national community college curriculum. Community colleges offer unique courses, but many curricular trends span across institutional boundaries. Although ESL and distance education have increased, the traditional liberal arts curriculum is relatively stable.

Reference

This Digest is drawn from: "Trends in Community College Curriculum." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Number 108, Gwyer Schuyler, Ed., Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA, Winter 1999.

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